

Hebrews 11:1-3; 12:1-2 John 20:19-31 April 19, 2020

Second Sunday of Easter

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

FEAR, FACTS, & FAITH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In the Monday, April 13, 2020 issue of the *Wall Street Journal*, Mucinex ran an ad spread over two pages, A8-A9. The two-page ad was divided into four 5" x 9.5" color rectangles. At the top of each box were the words "Spread Facts, Not Fear." Each box had a different bit of advice about dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic:

1. Tune out the opinions and listen to the experts.
2. Stay 6 feet apart to lower the risk of getting sick. Practice social distancing.
3. It's currently unknown if coronavirus is affected by the weather.
4. Nods and waves are cool again. Avoid handshakes.

A quick Google search of the topic "Facts, not fear" showed that it is a common theme these days. 11 Alive in Atlanta is sponsoring a special noon show with all the "need to know" updates about the coronavirus, and is focusing on the facts and not the fear around the virus.

CBS affiliate WBOC, Delmarva's News Leader, ran a show called "Covid-19: Facts Not Fear." WRAL in Raleigh aired a special program called "Coronavirus: Facts Not Fear." 9 News Perth in Australia also had a program with the same name. And the list goes on and on . . .

Today's gospel story from John 20, about Jesus appearing to his disciples (minus Thomas) on Easter evening, and again to his disciples (including Thomas) a week later has elements of fear and facts. Continuing with the idea of fear from last week's Easter sermon (when we heard both the angel at the tomb and the risen Lord Jesus say, "Do not be afraid"), today we read that later that first Easter night the disciples had locked themselves in the house for fear of the Jews. [Editorial note: This can be a dangerous verse, as it has been misused through the centuries to blame all Jews in all places at all times for the death of Jesus. As scholars point out, John here refers to the Jewish religious leaders, and not the Jews in general, as the disciples themselves were Jews.]

The footnote in my study Bible says this about the disciples locking themselves in the house "for fear of the Jews" – "The disciples fear the Jews like people of inadequate faith despite having heard Mary's message of the resurrection." [See John 20:18, where Mary, obeying Jesus' command, went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.]

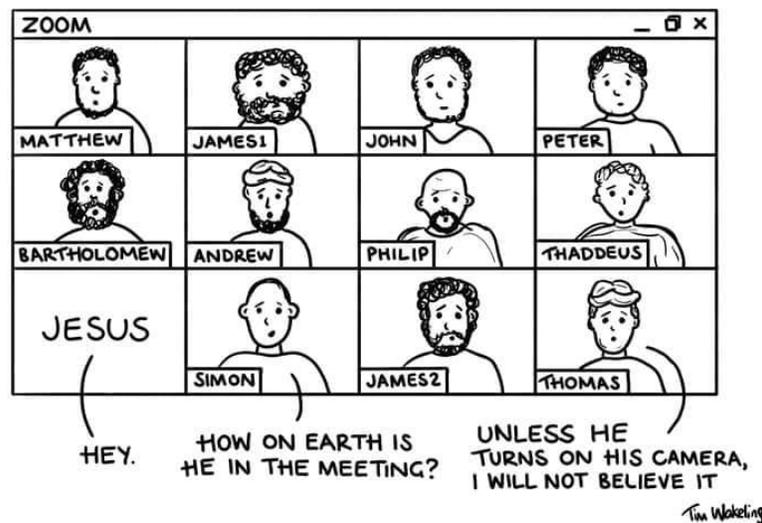
So, today's story begins with fear, and a week later, turns to a desire on Thomas' part for facts. Just as the other ten disciples demonstrated a lack of faith despite Mary's proclamation of good news, so Thomas is hesitant to believe when his fellow disciples tell him the very same message: "We have seen the Lord." In response, Thomas says, "Don't just tell me. . . Show me!"

Wednesday morning, about thirty minutes before our Zoom Bible study on this story about “doubting Thomas,” I saw a great cartoon on Facebook. In case you’re not familiar with Zoom teleconferencing, one feature allows all participants in the call to appear on the screen at the same time. Wednesday morning we had eight boxes on the screen. It looked kind of like the introduction to the old Brady Bunch TV show.



When you use Zoom, you can turn your camera off so you can’t be seen, but your name will appear on the screen. You can also mute your computer microphone so you can’t be heard. For security purposes, the meeting host can also mute/unmute all participants.

Anyway, the cartoon from Facebook shows drawings of the remaining eleven disciples in a Zoom teleconference meeting format. In the bottom left hand corner, there is the name Jesus, who, though you can’t see him, says, “Hey.” Next to him, Simon asks, “How on earth is he in on the meeting?” (That may be the earliest example of what’s called Zoombombing! Sort of like Jesus appearing and standing among the disciples in the locked room . . .) At the other end of the bottom row, Thomas emphatically proclaims, “Unless he turns on his camera, I will not believe it!”



That’s funny, and a pretty good 21st century interpretation of today’s story. In the comments section on Facebook, someone submitted a revised version of the disciples’ Zoom meeting. It looks like this:



Again, that's a very clever 21st century interpretation of the first Easter story. Remember: the women who went to the tomb were the first ones to be "unmuted" so they could tell the good news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, just as Mary Magdalene told the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

But that proclamation – "I have seen the Lord" – from Mary Magdalene to the disciples to Thomas wasn't enough for any of the disciples. It wasn't until the other ten disciples had encountered the risen Lord behind locked doors, in the midst of their fear, that they were able to move from fear to faith. And Thomas, who for whatever reason wasn't at the Easter evening gathering, asked for nothing more than his ten compatriots had already been privileged to see – Jesus' hands and side.

And yet, poor Thomas alone has been saddled for 2000 years with the unfortunate nickname "Doubting Thomas," despite the other disciples' slowness to believe the good news. Interestingly, in Matthew's parallel story at the end of his gospel, when the risen Jesus appears to his disciples on the mountain in Galilee, we read that "when they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." (Matthew 28:17)

Thomas wanted cold, hard facts. What he got instead was a call to faith. Even though Jesus offered Thomas his hands and side to feel, the story doesn't tell us Thomas took advantage of what he had so boldly demanded just a week earlier. His story is the classic illustration of the old saying, "Be careful what you ask for, you just might get it." Instead, when Thomas meets the risen Jesus, it is an opportunity for faith, and not just for Thomas, but for all of us, for everyone who has come after the disciples in the first century A.D. And Thomas responds with the most important, most basic, most fundamental confession/profession of faith: "My Lord and my God!"

John wrote his gospel around 85-90 A.D. He wrote his story for a community of believers, most of whom if not all had never laid eyes on Jesus before or after his resurrection. That's why Jesus also says to Thomas (and to us and to all believers), "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:29) Then John tells us all exactly why he wrote the story about the disciples who went from fear to faith and about Thomas who wanted facts and found faith. John writes, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31)

It's easy to miss a couple of important things in that English translation. First of all, when John says, "so that **you** may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing **you** may have life in his name," the "you" is plural – "that y'all may come to believe . . . that y'all may have life in his name." Second, the tense of "may come to believe" carries with it the sense of "believe and keep on believing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." John wrote to a community of believers who had not and did not see Jesus in the flesh. The community was going through hard times and needed the reassurance and encouragement of "Doubting Thomas'" ultimate profession of faith: "My Lord and my God!"

We are certainly living in days full of fear, flooded with facts, and looking to our faith in the risen Lord Jesus to see us through. I don't know that I'm going to talk about the coronavirus pandemic in every sermon until we come out on the other side, but it's the pressing concern in our lives right now. This crisis confronts us with the deepest existential questions of our existence, not the least of which is "Where is God in all of this?"

As I was working on this sermon, I came across a blog by Scott Hoeszee from Calvin Seminary, in which he addresses us preachers who are preaching about Thomas on this second Sunday of Easter. I found his comments helpful and encouraging, and I hope you will, also. He writes:

"Of course if we preach on this text the Sunday after Easter in the midst of the Covid-19 isolation, we do so once again via Zoom or other such virtual platforms. Just now we not only cannot grasp *Jesus'* nail-pierced hands, we cannot shake *anyone's* hand. We pastors cannot even grasp the hand of the suffering and the sorrowing. If ever we were in a moment of doubt, of wanting to see some evidence that God is near, is in control, that a better day may come by God's grace . . . well, this is such a moment. We may feel a bit less like Thomas and a bit more like that father in another Bible story who cried out to Jesus, 'I believe! Help my unbelief!' Because we have some very good questions for God just now. And let's not pretend we pastors or anyone else have easy answers. We are as caught up in this pandemic as anyone to whom we minister. All we can do with spiritual integrity is to direct God's people to God's Word, to what John wrote, to the witness he bore long ago and to the witness that, by the Spirit, John bears this day still."

There is a lot of controversy across the nation about whether or not churches should be open during this coronavirus pandemic. Some people claim that churches are being closed and people aren't free to practice their faith. Maybe just the opposite is

true. Maybe what we're really finding out is that what we've said for so many years – “The church is not a building, the church is the people” – is really true! Maybe what we're really finding out is that what Jesus said – “For where two or three are gathered in my name [Jesus doesn't say where or how they are gathered], I am there among them” – is really true!

Scott Hoezee writes, “We are troubled too. We are locked up in our houses out of fear of a virus we cannot see but that stalks us. So maybe there is Good News in this story that Jesus pops into locked rooms of fear. That he presents evidence – somehow, some way – of the Life he had to give. That he gives us a servant like John to tell us the story that we may believe. And this year perhaps that is enough. ‘My Lord and my God! Yes, Lord, stay close.’”¹

To close this morning, I'd like to share a poem by Andrew King, a minister member of The United Church of Canada. He says, “My goal is to post a poem a week about the Sunday Scripture lessons from the lectionary. I cannot claim that my poems will be of prize quality; I write primarily for spiritual self-nourishment. However, if someone else can derive even a small benefit from my work, then that will be an answer to prayer.” I find Andrew King's lectionary poetry to be thought-provoking, faith-uplifting, and spiritually nourishing. I hope you will also find the same in this poem called “What Thomas Wants.”

Thomas knows all about crucifixion.
Knows the nails driven into the victim
really tear the flesh,
damage the bones.

And he knows that this
is a crucifying world,
with all its violence,
greed and oppression

still hammering nails into the hands of justice,
still thrusting spears through the ribs of love,
still hanging mercy and kindness to die
and sealing up the tomb.

Thomas knows all about it.
So he knows that any real resurrection
will have to come out of ruin,
will have to come out of suffering,

will have to come out still bearing the scars
inflicted by the unjust world.

Ask him not
if he believes in a God
merely greater than suffering or death;

any God worth the title
would surely prove immortal,
who may be able to pretend our pain
but could never share it in truth.

No, what Thomas wants to see
is the Lord who rises from
death by crucifixion,

who rises
from the worst that our world can do:
who rises
from hells of corruption and cruelty,
who rises
from violence and terror and hate,
who rises
from rape and torture and war,
who rises
from hunger and disease and squalor,
who rises
torn and terribly scarred
yet walking among us still,

who will touch *us*
in our woundedness,
who will hold *us*
in our brokenness,
who sees in *us*
the prints left by the nails,
who puts his own hurt hand upon
our heartache, fear and despair
and breathe his healing peace
into our souls.

This is who Thomas wants to see – the only
Lord he wants to believe in.

Thomas just wants
to see Jesus.²

Let us pray: Lord, we are like Thomas with our questions and our doubts. We sometimes need to see in order to believe, we need you in order to have faith. We need the breath of the Holy Spirit to take away our fears so that we can come out from behind the locked doors that keep us from following you. Just as Thomas confessed you as his Lord and his God,

may we boldly claim the same for our lives. Lord we thank you for the blessing you have given us, the ones who believe without seeing. Amen.

NOTES

¹Scott Hoezee, “Easter 2A, April 13, 2020, John 20:19-31,” at www.cep.calvinseminary.edu.

²Andrew King, “Poem for the Sunday Lectionary (Easter 2, Yr C), What Thomas Wants,” at www.earth2earth.wordpress.com/tag/thomas/